



The GAPS Think Piece – 23

The distinctive contribution of non-formal education to engaging marginalized groups: Some European perspectives on community lifelong learning centres

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The key and distinctive contribution of non-formal education for lifelong learning has been consistently recognised at the European Union level. Non-formal education refers to structured education sessions where there is not an exam or formal assessment dimension. This is to be distinguished not only from formal education but also from informal learning, which refers to ways in which people learn in their everyday or other environments beyond attending classes.

Three key issues pertaining to non-formal education will be emphasised in this article, drawing on a twelve-country European research study in this area (Downes 2014), as part of both an access to education agenda generally and an access to higher education agenda. Firstly, non-formal education offers a key resource to engage marginalised groups in a non-threatening way. Secondly, the potential of community lifelong learning centres, accessible to marginalised groups in locations where they feel 'at home' offers a real lifeforce for non-formal education. Thirdly, while non-formal education may need to build more bridges to the formal education system in some countries, it is vital that it does not become simply reduced to formal education.

Non-formal Education as a Key Path to Overcome Fear of Failure in Marginalised Groups

For those traditionally alienated from the formal school system, the non-formal educational sector can serve as a key bridge towards social inclusion. Its climate tends to be more inviting, informal and flexible for learners who are often extremely intimidated by the thought of 'going back' for more education after usually negative experiences of schooling from the past. A key issue raised by international research is the need for a non-threatening atmosphere to overcome the fear of failure.



Development of a failure identity is demotivating for learners and contributes to the alienation of learners from the formal education system. For many, the formal system appears daunting and is associated with their previous negative experiences of education. There is a need here also to recognise that, as many potential learners have had extremely negative experiences of school, highlighting the benefits of learning for this group needs to clearly distinguish lifelong learning activities from their past school environment; lifelong learning as non-formal education must clearly be 'not' school. Against this background, the non-formal education system may offer a key non-threatening bridge for access to learning for adults from traditionally excluded groups.

The non-threatening environment of non-formal education offers an opportunity for learners to develop their sense of self-esteem and self-efficacy regarding learning. A non-formal education environment typically has a strong social component where there are opportunities for people to meet new people from both similar and different backgrounds to themselves. The conversations and friendships forged over a cup of tea or coffee, before or after the classes, can be a key motivating factor not only in further attending education classes but also in fostering future hopes and expectations to continue their pathways for learning.

The non-formal system offers diverse pathways for recognition of the learner's contribution; different opportunities for success. This issue of addressing fear of failure is vital also for encouraging those with literacy difficulties. Emergent readers and writers will be put off from attending education, if subjected to formal, standardized tests during intake assessments, as these may remind them of their previous negative school experiences.

Another key feature of the non-formal education setting is with regard to relationship building. It allows for less hierarchical student-teacher relations and a more democratic climate that has been emphasised in international research as vital for motivation and learning. A major opportunity provided by non-formal education is with regard to appreciation of the individual's previous life experience, for example, as part of personal development dimensions to education.



The non-formal education sector can provide paths into emotionally relevant education and also culturally relevant education. Personal development classes, with an emotional bridge to relevance, are particularly suited to engaging with an individual's life experience and to methods of active learning.

A further feature of non-formal education is its potential appreciation of wide ranges of intelligence. This echoes Gardner's (1993) examination of multiple types of intelligence in educational psychology, which identifies different types of intelligence, e.g., linguistic, musical, logical-mathematical, spatial, bodily kinesthetic and personal. It offers a wide range of opportunities for success for the adult learner, a factor of vital importance in bringing people back into education..

As a key bridge to access education in the formal sector, classes in the non-formal setting with emphasis on themes of personal development and community development offer an opportunity for the adult learner to gain increased confidence academically and socially—and can be a key space for nurturing motivation to continue education into the formal educational setting.

Community lifelong learning centres as a transitional space for outreach to engage marginalised groups with opportunities of pathways to access higher education over time

Community learning centres offer a potentially key pathway and bridge in providing outreach to marginalized communities, including to ethnic minorities, and also connection over time between the non-formal and formal systems. As is evident from the range of centres across different European countries, the community based location and proximity is an advantage in being able to engage with hard-to-reach groups who have tended to be alienated from the formal system. They offer mediating structures among marginalized individuals, communities and the 'system' in a neighbourhood location that is both physically accessible and psychologically accessible. Those who have been marginalised from the system can feel that they belong, without a sense of cultural distance, anomie and alienation from those working in the centre.



Key features of good practice in community-based lifelong learning centres include: a welcoming, supportive, non-hierarchical environment for the non-traditional learner, with a personalized learning focus; a proactive outreach strategy to engage those on the margins; a commitment to both leadership development within the organization and to fostering community leaders in communities experiencing marginalization; a commitment to democratic engagement with the voices and real needs of the learner, as part of a learner-centred focus and commitment; a commitment to both self-assessment and independent evaluation, to coherence between strategic objectives and activities engaged in, cognizant of the limitations of an agenda focused on outcomes for engaging those experiencing social marginalization; a commitment to engage in strategic partnerships as part of pathways for progression and communication between formal and non-formal education settings (Downes 2011).

Locating classes where they are needed means a range of different premises, including for example, crèches, libraries, shopping centres, church halls or mosques. Learners experiencing social exclusion may be much more at ease taking classes in such community-based environments. A notable strength of such centres is their ability to address personalised learning and literacy needs.

It is to be recognised that community lifelong learning centres may offer a combination of non-formal and formal education classes, though in doing so it is vital that the welcoming, relational, non-threatening atmosphere of non-formal education is sustained in such a centre. One example of this is *An Cosán*, Tallaght, Dublin, the largest independent community-based education centre in Ireland. They run programmes specifically for young women in the area who are lone parents and early school leavers. *An Cosán* caters to ethnic minorities who need to improve their English language skills, confidence or parenting skills. Parents, particularly fathers and their children, come to some classes together. They target community workers and leaders in the local community in order to support them and provide them with a qualification in the area. They cater to older people in the local area and provide support and advice for grandparents who help to rear their grandchildren (Dooley et al. 2010). This community centre adopts both a lifelong and life-wide focus, so that access to education opportunities extends across the generations.



An Cosán's Mission Statement 'is to contribute to the development of a culture of learning and leadership through educational and enterprise solutions for the particular challenges that face us'. The organisation offers community-based education, childcare and enterprise and is divided into three sections: • The Shanty Education and Training Centre, which provides Adult Community Education, • Rainbow House, the Early Childhood Education and Care facility, • Fledglings, the Social Enterprise Centre. Over 600 people attend adult education and training in An Cosán annually (Dooley et al., 2010).

An Cosán provides a service to an area of Dublin that is severely marginalised as a result of poverty and high levels of unemployment; this is a community living with high levels of poverty. It has a population of roughly 22,000 people, living mainly in rental housing in large, local authority estates. The area has a high immigrant population. The unemployment rate of principle earners is around 67%, and 40% of family units are headed by lone parents. There is a lack of amenities in the local area and poor public transport makes it difficult to access amenities elsewhere. There is limited access to childcare in the local area and anti-social behaviour is prevalent as many young people are pressured to join gangs and take drugs. An intergenerational cycle of educational exclusion exists. The level of educational attainment is generally low, with 27% of the population having no formal education or only a primary level education. Over 34% of the population leave school under the age of 16.

A strength of the organisation is the wide variety of courses and people that it caters to. Significantly, there is the option of progression through levels of courses for participants. The starting point is courses on Personal Development and Communication Skills, Basic Literacy and Numeracy. A second series of courses reflect the needs of the local community for training in leadership e.g. training for community drug workers and community development. These courses have been developed at the request of local community groups. The third series of courses are most important as they allow people to access further education. These courses include those run under the Young Women's Programmes. Some of their past students have gone on to third level colleges and universities, gaining certificates, diplomas and degrees. The majority of the students who access the services stay more than one year.



The fourth series of courses have, as their immediate goal, retraining or formalising skills for employment; a state-of-the-art computer centre allows courses to up-skill long term unemployed people. *An Cosán* helps participants 'to plot out a career path' and to access the programmes that they need to achieve this (Dooley et al., 2010).

In relation to reaching potential adult participants, the Manager...explains that when recruiting participants they:

"...go around the schools, talk to different women's groups...we used to have a mini-bus, letting people know that we have a big registration day on...trying to make an event out of it...turning up at local community events, to let people know we're here and what we're doing...being part of a lot of networks of local community organisations (Dooley et al., 2010)."

To engage marginalised groups, a word-of mouth, interpersonal approach is needed rather than one which relies on leaflets and posters as part of an informational approach that does not start from where the learner is at; a genuine outreach approach is needed to encourage, motivate and explain the potential benefits of engaging with education, and this needs to be through people with credibility in the local community, people who are trusted by communities who may be hugely alienated from the system and society, as well as from school experiences.

An interesting example of how the non-formal community education sector can make the environment less hierarchical and more organic is provided in this project, namely, that board members also attend the classes with the learners: as the Director explained, community project members, the steering committee members, also go to the classes, so there's constant feedback because the community people who are the leaders, are also members of the classes (Dooley et al. 2010).

It is recognised that there is much scope and opportunity for more explicit links with higher education institutions, to facilitate progression pathways for learners from such community lifelong learning centres to higher education.



This may not be an easy task in many countries and may require direction from government to encourage universities to engage with local community learning contexts as part of a university outreach strategy. Compared with the university sector, community education centres often are more trusted and have greater credibility within the community.

Another important example of a life-wide, community based lifelong learning centre model to engage ethnic minorities and those traditionally underrepresented in higher education is available from Kosovo. The Balkan Sunflowers' four Community Learning Centres in Fushë Kosova, Gračanica, Plemetina and Shtime respectively support the development of over 600 children from Roma, Ashkanli and Egyptian communities. Their project work involves a school preparatory programme for ages 5-7 and a language club for ages 7-9. For adults, in 2009-2010, women's literacy programmes were initiated in two centres. A parenting life skills programme has also been developed, which is in addition to the regular meetings with parents and home visits. Each community receives at least 4 programmes during the year inviting parents to participate in parenting skills exchanges. These discussions employ audio visual materials around questions of children support: role models, discipline, supporting school attendance, nutrition, hygiene, care, attention and neglect, etc. Tutors and facilitators undergo a two-week training across all four Centres.

According to figures from the Balkan Sunflowers NGO in Fushë Kosova, early school leaving rates over the two years of the Learning Centre operation decreased dramatically, from 120 in 2007-2008 to 14 in 2009-2010. Primary school enrollment has more than tripled in Gračanica since the Centre's opening in 2004, going from 25 to 85 children. None of the children attending Gračanica Learning Centre dropped out of primary school in 2013, while only one child in Plemetina dropped out of school that year. 75% of all registered Roma children in Plemetina attend the Learning Centre, while girls' school attendance has increased and there are currently 58 girls in primary school (Downes 2011).



The Need for National and Regional Strategies for Non-formal Education and Community Lifelong Learning Centres, including as Part of an Access to Higher Education Agenda that Relates But Not Reduces Non-formal Education to the Formal System

It is apparent that there is a severe lack of strategic direction at the national level in many countries in Europe regarding non-formal education. A related problem in some contexts is a lack of information on this sector at the national level, including official statistics or strategy documents with concrete funded action plans. At times, it is even unclear which government ministry is responsible for non-formal education. In some countries, non-formal education is not especially targeted at marginalised groups and may not be free of charge for them or may be left simply to the private sector. Another neglected target group in some European countries for non-formal education and access to higher education, though not others, is prisoners.

A funding and quality assurance system, with monitoring mechanisms and recognition of competences of non-formal education, is needed in many European countries. A policy vacuum and lack of national strategic direction and priority accorded to non-formal education leads not only to its lack of development, but to its potential colonisation by the formal education sector. With the emphasis on accreditation and credit frameworks growing, much provision which has been non-formal may disappear or become part of the formal system.

This issue of colonisation of non-formal education by the formal education sector is highlighted in a number of European countries, though the community lifelong learning centre model, where both aspects can take place in the one location, offers a way forward to prevent this kind of colonisation occurring.

A systemic level focus on transition and connection between the non-formal and formal education sector, without colonisation of the non-formal, requires interrogation of the distinctive features of the non-formal education sector, which need to be retained in any such connection and interaction. What adults look for in non-formal adult education institutions is often exactly the opposite of what they experienced in a traditional schooling context or a classroom environment. The flexibility of the non-formal education sector is a prevalent theme in a number of countries.



It is sometimes claimed that the practical approach and more open learning environment are what differentiate non-formal education from formal education in their country, though it is to be hoped that formal education would also provide an open, welcoming environment, with classes relevant to people's life experiences and needs. Cross-fertilization between the non-formal and formal education sector needs to be seen as an opportunity not a threat, once the identities of both are acknowledged and valued at national and local levels.

What emerges from the review of European contexts (Downes 2014) is that there is a need for a much more accentuated strategic focus at national and regional levels on the promotion of non-formal education, generally, and specifically, for the targeting of socio-economically excluded groups for participation in non-formal education. A corollary of such a strategic commitment is the provision of distinct funding strands for non-formal education. It is apparent that different criteria for quality, distinctive to the non-formal sector, need to be developed. The twin concerns of the need for processes of validation of the work of the non-formal sector, on the one hand, and the danger of 'colonisation' of the non-formal education sector by the formal education sector on the other hand were explicitly recognised.

Against this backdrop, there is a need for any validation process to be different from that of the formal education sector, to give expression to the difference of the non-formal sector in a range of ways. The flexibility and 'relationality' of the non-formal sector must not be lost by reducing it to the Procrustean bed of the formal education sector.

An important step in reconciling these concerns is to identify a range of different criteria for validation of courses in the non-formal sector, criteria that would help maintain its differences from the formal sector. It is important to emphasise that there may be more than one kind of quality focus depending on the different kinds of goals for projects within the non-formal education sector. Furthermore, and most importantly, direct social inclusion goals for reaching some of the most marginalised groups in the non-formal sector would need to be expressly factored into any quality review criteria or indicators for the non-formal sector.



Conclusion

It is absolutely essential for access issues to include the non-formal sector, though this does not preclude some flexibility on how this would be interpreted in a country with a very undeveloped non-formal sector. The non-formal system can play a key role for access to education for traditionally underrepresented groups, including access to higher education, by helping to overcome fear of failure, providing opportunities for recognition of wider dimensions of a person's success in education, offering outreach initiatives and education relevant to a person's emotional development, as well as culturally relevant themes that offer opportunities for active citizenship and community development. Pervading all of these aspects is the recognition that a person's life experience is a starting point for learning that goes beyond 'deficit' models of learning and experience.

Community-based lifelong learning centres offer one key example of an outreach location for non-formal education to reach socially excluded, ethnic minorities, as part of a wider strategy of developing non-formal education for engaging these groups and others experiencing social exclusion.

Community-based lifelong learning centres, with a life-wide dimension, can serve a key role as a counterbalance to a fear of failure, by instilling an interest in and motivation to learn by means of personally, emotionally and culturally relevant course materials. It is evident that, while there are a range of examples of local community-based lifelong learning centres as part of non-formal education across a number of European countries, there is a clear need for a more strategic approach to develop such centres at the European level (see also Downes 2011), and arguably globally. As part of this, there is a need for distinct funding strands to be developed at international global levels, in conjunction with commitments from individual countries, strands focusing purely on establishing such community-based local learning centres.

A fundamental question arises from this brief overview of non-formal education and community lifelong learning centres: Can there be a global movement to give strategic direction and investment to this much needed dimension of outreach to engage marginalised communities in education, as part of a wider global access to higher



education agenda? This global movement needs to celebrate the distinct role non-formal education and community lifelong learning centres can play in transforming the lives of individuals and communities and in creating cultures of learning in environments previously displaced from the education system, as part of a global access to higher education agenda.

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